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ROMOLA AND VICTORIAN LIBERALISM

By Daniel S. Malachuk

IN HIS 1867 REVIEW OF TWO RECENT historical novels, Henry James worried that, barring "a second Walter Scott," no modern mind could synthesize the increasingly scientific discipline of history and the imagination of fiction. "[S]tory-tellers are, for the most part, an illogical, loose-thinking, ill-informed race" (280), James teased, while the new historian – he refers to "writers of a purely scientific turn of mind" such as "Niebuhr and Mommsen, Gizot and Buckle" (278) – "works in the dark, with a contracted forehead and downcast eyes, on his hands and knees, as men work in coal-mines" (279). James's anxious jocularity does little to disguise his interest in (and intimidation before) the ascetic historian, particularly that new professional's willingness to "say sternly to his fancy: So far thou shalt go, and no further." Why, James subsequently wondered, should the novelist "not [also] imprison his imagination, for the time, in a circle of incidents from which there is no arbitrary issue, and apply his ingenuity to the study of a problem to which there is but a single solution" (279)?

When James in the same essay dismissed George Eliot's *Romola* (1863), a novel set in Renaissance Florence, as "a very beautiful story, but . . . quite worthless . . . as a picture of life in the fifteenth century" (281), he anticipated much of the commentary written about this book ever since. The plot spans the six years between the death of "Lorenzo the Magnificent" in 1492 (ending sixty years of oligarchic Medici family rule) and the execution of the radical republican and Dominican priest Girolamo Savonarola in 1498, whose demands for civic renewal through absolute virtue posed a threat to the newly formed republican legislature as well as the Church. Situated within this factual context is Eliot's fictional heroine Romola de' Bardi, who struggles to reconcile herself to the daughterly and wifely duties demanded of her by a city that (as republic or oligarchy) was consistently patriarchal. At the end of the novel, however, Romola suddenly flees the city, attempts suicide by open boat, awakens downwind to save Jewish survivors of a plague-struck village, and then quietly returns to an apparently apolitical domestic bliss. For most critics, past and present, the concluding events have indeed comprised (as James put it) "an arbitrary issue," exemplifying the novel's failed synthesis of history and romance. Antifeminist critics from Eliot's own era generally disliked the romance, or what R. F. Hutton called in his 1863 review the "somewhat feeble and womanish chapters with which [the novel] concludes" (qtd. in Carroll 205). Feminist critics from our own era have generally disliked the history, indeed, often valuing just those romance moments in the novel when Eliot refused to "imprison [her] imagination" (James's phrasing takes on a darker meaning here) within the viciously patriarchal politics of the city-state.[1]

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It has arguably been the perceived failure of this synthesis that has made *Romola* one of Eliot's least enjoyed but most studied novels, a book "more interesting to analyze than simply to read" (175), as Barbara Hardy admitted back in 1959. Eliot's apparent lack of control of her material has proven irresistible to critics eager to fit the various pieces of the novel into different interpretive paradigms. The three well-known paradigms that have dominated the commentary on *Romola* – what I will describe as the humanist, the culturist, and the communitarian – are, for all their political quibbles with one another, notably alike in their relative indifference to the historical specificity that was so obviously important to the novelist herself. The major arguments made here will be that, while our own critical appreciation of *Romola*'s historical specificity has matured in recent years, our interpretive paradigms have not, and that, rather than retooling old paradigms forged decades ago by a modern critical culture that did not share our (and Eliot's) interest in history, we need to create new, more historically-attuned paradigms. Specifically, I present Eliot's *Romola* as part of a larger Victorian liberal conversation about the role of virtue in polities otherwise dedicated to the fullest realization of individual autonomy – an enduring (if not always well understood) challenge for all liberal polities. In the first part of this essay, I demonstrate the origins of this (what I will call) "liberty problem" in Florentine republican thought as well as its place within Victorian liberal thought; in the second part, I examine how Eliot approaches the liberty problem in *Romola* via the *Risorgimento* mythology and (what we now call) republican womanhood theory, concluding with a thought about the relationship between Eliot's approach to the liberty problem and her cosmopolitanism.

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PUBLISHED SERIALLY IN 1862–63, *Romola* was George Eliot's first attempt to set a novel somewhere other than the English Midlands of her youth, and the toll that the research and composition of this mid-career novel took on her is well known. With the assistance of George Henry Lewes, Eliot researched the period for more than a year before she wrote a word of the novel, including intense study of English, Italian, Latin, French, and German sources. Serious doubts about the worth of the endeavor plagued her throughout its composition, and George Eliot would famously report much later to her second husband that "I began it a young woman, – I finished it an old woman" (qtd. in Harris 340). Just as famously, however, Eliot wrote to her publisher John Blackwood that "there is no book of mine about which I more thoroughly feel that I could swear by every sentence as having been written with my best blood, such as it is" (*Letters* 6: 335–36).

Still, readers then and now have deemed Eliot's venture into historical fiction largely a failure. Initial judgments (such as John Morley's in an unsigned 1863 review) that the book too often lapsed into an "instructive antiquarianism" (qtd. in Carroll 208), or (from an anonymous reviewer in the same year) that the "accumulation of details . . . affects us like a medieval painted window, in which the action has to be disentangled from the blaze of colour and overwhelming accessories" (qtd. in Carroll 215–16), are to be found throughout a near century-and-a-half of critical commentary.[2] And, perhaps it is because so many critics have believed neither Eliot nor her readers to have had a handle on the period that they have been so ready to squeeze this novel into their own favored paradigms. Three in particular have proven useful to modern critics.

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The first paradigm is the humanist one, exemplified most of all by those critics who read "*Romola* as Positivist Allegory" (as J. B. Bullen titled a 1975 article). While, as Bullen contended in 1994, the term "Renaissance" was still a highly ambiguous one in English writing in the 1860s, Eliot's philosophical commitment to the positivism of Auguste Comte was certain (209). Alluding to Romola's shift in allegiance from her father Bardo de' Bardi (the classical scholar) to Savonarola (the Dominican friar) to her own domestic humanism, T. R. Wright argued similarly in 1986 that in *Romola* "the heroine passes through all three of Comte's stages" – the classical, the theological, and the positivist – "thereby tracing in her own life the history of Humanity" (189–90). From this perspective, the novel's setting in fifteenth-century Florence is irrelevant; her positivist "religion of humanity," Andrew Sanders wrote in 1979, "entails planting a nineteenth-century seed in a fifteenth-century soul" (176–77). So, if critics more recently have backed away from reading the novel strictly as a Comtist parable, *Romola*'s restricted significance as a nineteenth-century humanist parable is well-established.[3]

Sharing this indifference to the novel's historical setting, the culturist paradigm could be considered merely a variation of the humanist, except that this second paradigm is more concerned with society than belief. According to the culturalist paradigm, *Romola* does not so much trace a progression from classicalism through spiritualism to humanism as show the social tensions between classicalism and spiritualism and their final reconciliation in "Culture." The most influential proponent of this paradigm has been David DeLaura whose seminal *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold, and Pater* (1969) examined "the process by which the substance of dogmatic Christianity was transformed, within one or two generations, into the fabric of aestheticism" (xi): in other words, how Hebrew and Hellene are synthesized in the late Victorian era through a "progressive religionizing of the idea of culture" (xi–xii). In a short 1966 article that anticipated his major argument, DeLaura contended that Walter Pater (one of the major agents of this synthesis) drew his aesthetic philosophy largely from Savonarola as portrayed in Eliot's *Romola*. In both *Romola* and Pater's *The Renaissance* (1873), DeLaura explained, Savonarola represents "an indispensable element in the complex dialectic of Christian and pagan motifs" (230). "Perhaps it is the unexpected sympathy which Pater extends to the ascetic Savonarola [in *The Renaissance*] which most marks the influence of *Romola* in *The Renaissance*" (229), he wrote, specifically tracing the "complex dialectic of Christian and pagan motifs in the high Renaissance" in Pater's book to Eliot's novel (230). As in the first paradigm, *Romola*'s specific historical setting is assumed to be mostly an exotic stage for a very Victorian drama. As DeLaura put it, Eliot and Pater were drawn to the period because it seemed loosely to parallel their own: "the opposition between the Renaissance humanists and the religious reformers," he wrote, "was not dissimilar to that between Mill and Huxley and the varying kinds of Victorian religious revivalists" (230), a conclusion reached by several other important modern critics of the novel.[4]

The third paradigm, the communitarian, requires reading Eliot's entire oeuvre as challenged not so much by the death of God, or the dialectic between Christian and classical cultures, but by the modern loss of community. Many of these critics have found a more theorized version of this thesis in Ferdinand Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, or *Community and Society* (1887), in which local, organic agricultural communities based upon the family and tradition are pitted against an urban heterogeneous industrial society that is shaped by the rational pursuit of self-interest in a capitalistic and secular environment.

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Tracing this tension between community and society back to Scott's historical novels (38–39), for example, Avrom Fleishman in the *The English Historical* Novel (1971) contended that *Romola* (along with Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) and the historian Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* [1860]) is "elegiac" in heralding the death of *Gemeinschaft* (152). Suzanne Graver developed the correlation with Tönnies more completely in her *George Eliot and Community* (1984), where she argued that Eliot in nearly all her novels engaged in describing this fundamental modern transition from community to society (14–15). The historian Bernard Semmel reiterated this reading in 1994, portraying Eliot as ostensibly dedicated to liberalism but in fact bemoaning the loss of "family affection and social cohesion" (5–6). For all of these critics, too, the specific historical period of *Romola* is a matter of indifference, as Eliot only intended it as a gesture to an "inherited tradition of piety and asceticism" (Fleishman 155), a pre-politicized urban mass (Graver 13–14), or a national community of the past (Semmel 11–13).

Needless to say, all three of these paradigms have their uses in situating Eliot's oeuvre as a whole as well as *Romola* particularly within the greater contexts of Victorian culture and society. Indeed, together, these paradigms account for much of the work of modern Victorian studies. However, none of these paradigms is able to – or seems even to want to – make sense of Eliot's specific choice of fifteenth-century Florence. As I have already suggested, it may be the persistent assumption that the novel is a failure as a historical romance that has made critics relatively complacent with analyses that operate at such a level of historical generality: a progressive tale moving through the three stages of humanity, a dialectical tale resolving Hebrew and Hellene in culture, or a regressive tale siding with *Gemeinschaft* over *Geschellschaft*. But, as most of these same critics have also conceded (and bemoaned), the novel itself clearly operates at a level of great historical specificity, which suggests that the real if difficult question to start with when interpreting *Romola* is, why *exactly* did Eliot choose late fifteenth-century Florence as the setting?

One way to begin to answer that question is to review what we now know about the period, particularly in relation to the history of liberal theory. The two major contemporary historians of "the republican tradition," J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, both have emphasized this period's significance as (in Pocock's phrase) the seminal "Machiavellian moment," when political theorists first grappled with the paradox of modern political existence. "The formal dilemma of the humanist republic," Pocock explained in *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), was "that it was an attempt to realize a universality of values within a particular, and therefore finite and modal, political structure," or more specifically "the problem of reconciling the Hellenic view that man was formed to live in a city with the Christian view that man was formed to live in communion with God" (84). For later theorists, Pocock argued, the great interest of this period – from the fall of the Medici in 1494 through their reestablishment in 1537 – was that, for the first time, political thinkers "work[ed] out the implications and contradictions inherent in civic humanism" (86). Savonarola represented one major approach, contending (again in Pocock's words) that the contradictions between universal moral values and particular political structures "could be finally overcome only if the final phase of a republic's existence could be made to coincide with the millennium, end of time, or eschaton" (84). In other words, these values could be achieved if the political structure of the humanist republic could be remade as the City of God. In Savonarola's thinking, this task required equating the practice of civic virtue with the achievement of spiritual rebirth, which, as Quentin Skinner has pointed out, was one of the two dominant

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qualities of Savonarola's thought (*The Foundations* 145). The other dominant quality of Savonarola's thought was his rejection of the "ideal of the *vir* who devotes his *virtus* to seeking the attainment of honor, glory, and fame" (*The Foundations* 146), the keynote of Machiavelli's rival and much more worldly approach to the problem of realizing universal values with the merely political structures at hand. Writing after Savonarola's martyrdom and the return of the Medici, Machiavelli essentially gave up the godly city as utopian and instead defended *virtù* as the most powerful tool for securing provisional stability, one of the few values that humans could enjoy in a cosmos governed by *fortuna*. Machiavelli was particularly convinced of the importance of citizen militias in this regard.

Adjust that Christian "universality of values" to mean universal individual liberty and one begins to understand the deep significance of these Renaissance Florentine articulations of the "humanist republic" to modern liberals, from the seventeenth century forward. What I am calling the liberty problem is the problem, for liberals, of how to realize universally this primary value, individual liberty, within a particular political structure, democracy. To put the problem in more familiar Victorian terms, given the inevitability of democracy, how exactly will *all* citizens enjoy liberty without plunging the state (the then, and still, favored political structure) into anarchy? There are several representative mid-century formulations of the liberty problem that one could turn to at this point, including any of the well-known hyperbolic passages about "doing as one likes" (51) as Matthew Arnold notoriously slighted liberty in defense of stability in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). However, the first chapter of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) is more instructive, for it reveals that the liberty problem – that is, how to achieve and maintain stability in a polity committed to individual freedom – deeply preoccupied the era's "libertarian" as much as its "authoritarian" liberals. As important as the famous paragraph in that first chapter of *On Liberty* is, which announces "the object of this Essay is to assert . . . that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection" (80), it is the paragraphs following that actually teach us more about how Victorian liberals – from Arnold to Mill – understood the liberty problem, which was very closely related to the way Florentine republicans did. In the course of describing those "warranted" interferences with individual liberty, Mill reiterates many of the same policies one finds in Savonarola and Machiavelli. Consider just these two sentences:

> There are also many positive acts for the benefits of others, which he [the citizen] may rightfully be compelled to perform; such as, to give evidence in a court of justice; to bear his fair share in the common defence, or in any other joint work necessary to the interest of the society of which he enjoys the protection; and to perform certain acts of individual beneficence, such as saving a fellow-creature's life, or interposing to protect the defenceless against ill-usage, things which whenever it is obviously a man's duty to do, he may rightfully be made responsible to society for not doing. A person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction, and in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury. (81–82)

Here, one witnesses Mill, like so many liberals since, drifting between solutions that promise only civic stability (jury duty, military duty, etc.) to ambitions more moral – more Savonarolan – in scope (the performance of "certain acts of individual beneficence," "any other joint work necessary to the interest of . . . society," the implicit elimination of "evil"). In short, like the Florentine republican, the Victorian liberal approached the liberty problem

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with virtue uppermost in mind, but an understanding of virtue so elastic as to make routine (even within the same sentence) dramatic leaps around that spectrum of virtue policies long ago defined by the theories of Machiavellia and Savonarola.[5]

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ELIOT WAS TYPICAL OF VICTORIAN LIBERALS in approaching the liberty problem with this same elastic understanding of virtue, which is why, I think, it has been difficult for modern commentators to see the consistency of her concerns. To best appreciate Eliot's thinking about virtue in relation to the liberty problem in *Romola* specifically, there are two nineteenth-century contexts, both notably overlooked in the modern commentary on the novel, that deserve special attention: *Risorgimento* and republican womanhood theory.

The relationship between virtue and liberty is a richly developed one in other nineteenth-century contexts, and one additional context is particularly helpful in introducing the two that will be my focus in this section of the essay. That context was the contemporary French experience, which provided liberals across the Channel with a pungent example of what happens to modern states when they seek to become more egalitarian in their promotion of liberty. In 1848, George Eliot showed herself, quite clearly, to be inspired by the pursuit of liberty, and, more obscurely, to be troubled by its associated problem, the dangerous fragility of political structures when faced with the universal realization of liberty. This is from a letter to a friend that year:

> I thought we had fallen on such evil days that we were to see no really great movement . . . but I begin to be glad of my date. I would consent, however, to have a year clipt off my life for the sake of witnessing such a scene as that of the men of the barricade bowing to the image of Christ 'who first taught fraternity to men.' (*Letters* 1: 253)

In elaborating, Eliot shows her heart to be in the right place, as far as her dedication to the value of individual liberty, but, like so many other Victorian liberals, to be exceedingly unsure of the means to achieving a truly liberal polity. On the one hand, Eliot admires the Christian virtues of the French workers and writes also that "our decayed monarchs should be pensioned off" (1: 254); but on the other hand, she admits to being very concerned that anarchy would result if newly liberated citizens were not virtuous. She admits here, for example, that she has "no hope of good from any imitative movement at home," for, while "[i]n France the mind of the people is highly electrified – they are full of ideas on social subjects," "[h]ere [there is only] selfish radicalism and unsatisfied brute sensuality" (1: 254), a theme elaborated upon in the "Address to Working Men" from *Felix Holt* (1866).

The cause of Italian unification intrigued Victorian liberals for similar reasons, as it involved not only the moral clarity of the Italian peoples' struggles for liberty against various great European powers but also that more complex question of "the mind of the people." In terms of the latter, whatever the specific failings of character among contemporary Italians (as so often noted by British and American liberals visiting the major cities), the robust mythology of *Risorgimento* had a way of dissipating that particular concern, so that there was no shortage of English writers ready to champion the cause. Meaning literally "the resurgence," *Risorgimento* was indeed a complete mythology, developed by Italian patriots since the Congress of Vienna in 1815, and including major episodes and figures from Italy's

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past, all telling the same story. Central to that story was Savonarola, whose republic stood in the mythology for the last moment of Italian independence before their enslavement by foreign oppressors (Thompson 70). In fact, the six years of Florentine history (1492–98) that Eliot chose to fictionalize in her novel were perhaps the six most important years in the *Risorgimento* mythology (Thompson 69).[6]

Eliot's own version of the mythology seems to have been significantly shaped by three sources in particular, sources that also reinforced one another in terms of their approach to the liberty problem. One source that is recognized as influencing Eliot's thinking is the two-volume *La Storia di Girolamo Savonarola* (Firenza 1859–61) by perhaps the most influential *Risorgimento* historian, Pasquale Villari. In Villari's telling, Savonarola emerges as a hero of Italian freedom and a passionate advocate of republican government (Santangelo 119–21), and a rebel against Church as much as against political despotism (Thompson 71). George Henry Lewes began reading Villari's history during his and Eliot's first visit to Florence in 1861, and he immediately pressed Eliot to read it as well. In it, Savonarola attempted "to establish freedom through the reformation of private virtue so that civic virtue would evolve naturally through private sanctity" (Santangelo 119–20). Savonarola's fanaticism, on the other hand, is significantly downplayed by Villari (Santangelo 120, Thompson 72). (This is a fact that is perhaps more remarkable to modern than Victorian readers, overly influenced as we are by Jakob Burckhardt's contemporaneous portrait of the friar as a *Gemeinschaft* medievalist [Weinstein 5–6].) In short, Savonarola, in Villari's telling, offers a fairly compelling solution to the liberty problem, contending that liberty is best ensured through the (moderately) religious cultivation of moral virtues.[7]

A second source would be Lewes himself, particularly when one remembers he was Eliot's primary sounding-board during her conceptualization of *Romola*. Lewes's political vision was, like Eliot's, fundamentally liberal, as is clear from his own response to the events of 1848. His interest in *Risorgimento*, for one, can be traced to that year, when he began a radical paper, the *Leader*, which for a decade espoused, among other liberal economic and social causes, "international republicanism, with Mazzini at its head" (Ashton 86). Yet another product of Lewes's 1848 enthusiasm was his *Life of Maximilien Robespierre* (1849), an examination of another failed republic of virtue. Here, Lewes dwelt on the positive influence of Rousseau on Robespierre but ultimately condemned him as a fanatic, for his "intense dogmatism coupled with a want of human sympathy" (327). One can hypothesize that, in contrast to Robespierre, the less fanatical Savonarola (in Villari's telling at least) must have been extremely appealing to Lewes. In any case, that Lewes was excited by Villari's portrait of Savonarola is clear from the famous journal entry alluded to above.[8]

A third, and also overlooked, source of Eliot's interest in the *Risorgimento* generally and the late fifteenth century specifically would be Thomas Anthony Trollope, the younger brother of the famous novelist and an expatriate living in Florence. When Trollope hosted Eliot and Lewes at his home there (they slept comfortably in the cow house), he was himself writing a four-volume history of Florence – one, like Villari's, inspired by the *Risorgimento* mythos. (Trollope would proudly recollect in his memoir, *What I Remember*, that Villari wrote to tell him "my history of Florence to be in his opinion the best work in the subject extant" [417–18].) That history was published in 1865 as *History of the Commonwealth of Florence from the Earliest Independence of the Commune to the Fall of the Republic in 1531*. In his memoir, Trollope recalled that he "had much talk with George Eliot during this time – very short at Florence – when she was maturing her Italian novel, 'Romola'" (462), and it

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is notable that this political historian, for one, appreciated the result.[9] We can only speculate about the nature of their talk, of course, but what is clear is that Trollope himself – like Villari and Lewes – viewed the period very much through the lens of the liberty problem. Committed like other Victorian liberals – from Mill to Arnold – to the Athenian polis, or "municipalism," as the essence of political life, Trollope contended in his *History* "that the municipal system, as it was developed in Italy, possesses capabilities of carrying social life to a larger and higher degree of civilization" (Trollope *History* 1: 2). At the same time, like Machiavelli as well as Mill, Trollope was highly aware of the particular nature of political structures (to recall Pocock's language), especially the (in Trollope's words) "predisposing tendency to decay and dissolution in the constitution of the municipal form of social organization" (*History* 1: 4). More, Trollope was highly suspicious of Machiavelli's emphasis upon militias as a means of checking that predisposing tendency to decay, recognizing in such martial solutions a tendency to repress the specific value of overwhelming importance to liberals, individual liberty (*History* 4: 100–01). At the same time, Trollope's portrait of Savonarola's greater ambitions is also more ambiguous than Villari's, emphasizing not only Savonarola's patriotism but his fanaticism too (1865 4: 23–24, 61–62, 107, 130).

Like Villari, Lewes, and Trollope, Eliot in *Romola* clearly viewed her period through a version of the *Risorgimento* mythology distinctly inflected by the liberty problem. The "Proem" to the novel makes it clear that Eliot understands late fifteenth-century Florence as a period of contemporary interest because it dramatizes the challenge of self-rule. The city, we are told, stands "as an almost unviolated symbol, amidst the flux of human things, . . . that we still resemble the men of the past more than we differ from them," specifically in their political preoccupations:

> [The Florentine's] politics had . . . the passionate intensity, and the detailed practical interest, which could belong only to a narrow scene of corporate action . . . where men knew each other as they passed in the street, set their eyes every day on the memorials of their commonwealth, and were conscious of having not simply the right to vote, but the chance of being voted for. (46)

As the plot progresses, one sees particularly the influence of Eliot's three sources in her depiction of the theories of both Machiavelli and Savonarola. In her three sources, Machiavelli's republican theory appears as an intriguing but ultimately dangerous and ineffectual solution to the liberty problem. *Romola* comes to a similar conclusion. Relatively early in the novel, Machiavelli, represented as a thoughtful intellectual with a keen interest in rival republican strategists, is one of the "men of ideas" Eliot carefully places in the crowd listening to Savonarola's patriotic calls for republican independence (299; ch. 25). This characterization is muddied, however, by the narrator having earlier hinted that Machiavelli's curiosity was more a function of youth than temperament, and that he would indeed eventually become the infamous champion of realpolitik (221; ch. 16). And it is that emergence of the "real" Machiavelli that is most significantly emphasized in the course of novel's few scenes involving him. While early in the novel Machiavelli admires Savonarola's power as an orator (224; ch. 16), later we learn that this admiration is not for Savonarola's spiritual profundity but for his having "got the ear of the people . . . because he gives them threats and promises, which they believe come straight from God, not only about hell, purgatory, and paradise, but about Pisa and our Great Council" (471; ch. 45). As the real Machiavelli would set forth so memorably in *The Prince*, *virtù* is no moral quality but the mere mastery of *fortuna*, like

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the channeling of a raging river for a season or two (Machiavelli 82). Eliot's Machiavelli contends similarly that "the cause of [Savonarola's] power will be the cause of his fall" (472). By its very nature, *fortuna* always overwhelms even the most "virtuous" leader, particularly if that leader has silly qualms about using all that *fortuna* bestows upon him. As the character Machiavelli explains in one critique of Savonarola, "[i]f a prophet is to keep his power, he must be a prophet like Mahomet, with an army at his back, that when the people's faith is fainting it may be frightened into life again" (472; ch. 45), a critique that Eliot has Machiavelli develop at some length in the chapter "The Scaffold" while awaiting with the rest of the crowd the renewed republic's zealous execution of enemies – a policy Machiavelli strongly favors (581–82; ch. 60). When Eliot characterizes Machiavelli's interpretation of Savonarola's motives as one "that presupposed no loftiness" (522; ch. 52), she clearly intends to situate Machiavelli (as most Victorian liberals did) at the far end of the spectrum of approaches to the liberty problem, where civic virtue is a mere instrument of state rather than a path to moral perfection. Like her sources, then, *Romola* is notably willing to consider the merits of *virtù* as a means to stabilizing republics, but ultimately deems the approach not only cruel but ineffective at stemming corruption, decline, and fall.[10]

At the other end of the spectrum, if Villari, Lewes, and Trollope were also ambivalent about Savonarola's religious solution to the liberty problem, they generally found it of more interest and potential than Machiavelli's. The same is true, again, of *Romola*. For one, Savonarola, and not Machiavelli, is obviously the republican theorist of fundamental concern in this novel. Not only does Savonarola's rise and fall frame the action of the novel, but the narrator provides ample and often textbook explanations of the republican logic of Savonarola's decisions, even the most minor, along the way. For example, we learn in detail not only Savonarola's reasoning in instituting the Pyramid of the Vanities (498–502; ch. 49) but also his purpose in creating a Great Council as "the only practicable plan for giving an expression to the public will large enough to counteract the vitiating influence of party interests," etc. (385; ch. 35).

Most importantly, it is Savonarola who explicitly teaches Romola about civic virtue, emphasizing its essence to be (*pace* Machiavelli) moral rather than political. At the end of Book II, for example, when Romola leaves her husband Tito in disgust, the Frate stops her on the road from Florence. "[Y]ou are flying from your debts," he argues, "the debt of a Florentine woman; the debt of a wife. You are turning your back on the lot that has been appointed for you" (430; ch. 40). When Romola pleads that she can no longer love her husband, Savonarola argues that her duties as a wife and citizen of Florence remain: "My daughter, you are a child of Florence; fulfill the duties of that great inheritance. Live for Florence – for your own people, whom God is preparing to bless the earth. . . . Come, my daughter, come back to your place!" (436; ch. 40). It is true that Romola in her return to Florence does not exactly validate Savonarola's equation of civic virtue and strict obedience to a patriarchal God. Instead of resuming her civic duties in the domestic sphere as the Frate demands, Romola redefines a republican woman's sphere to encompass public life as well. Book III begins with Romola busy assisting the victims of the struggle against the French. Addressed in a "fraternal way by ordinary citizens" as Madonna Romola, "[t]he idea of home had come to be identified for her less with the house in the Via de Bardi . . . than with the towered circuit of Florence, where there was hardly a turn of the streets at which she was not greeted with looks of appeal or of friendliness" (452; ch. 43). Still, in all of this, Eliot through Romola is nevertheless endorsing Savonarola's moral understanding of civic virtue.

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This is made especially clear in the pivotal scene where Romola meditates on Savonarola's fall and disgrace. Her soul "cried out for some explanation of his lapses which would make it still possible for her to believe that the main striving of his life had been pure and grand" (663; ch. 71). Reassessing her recent period of disbelief as an overreaction to Savonarola's fall, Romola now finds it "impossible that it had not been a living spirit . . . which had once breathed in the Frate's words, and kindled a new life in her" (663; ch. 71). Yes, Romola continues to muse, "[e]ven in this [forced] confession [to crimes against the republic], . . . Fra Girolamo shone forth as a man who had sought his own glory indeed, but sought it by labouring for the very highest end – the moral welfare of men – not by vague exhortations, but by striving to turn beliefs into energies that would work in all the details of life" (664; ch. 71). In her *Romola*, in short, Eliot (like her three sources) may eschew the fanatical (and also patriarchal) aspects of Savonarola's theory, but she seems fully to endorse the moral program of civic virtue at the heart of that theory.

Before examining the novel's meditations upon the liberty problem within the second context, republican womanhood theory, it is important to see that Eliot was by no means alone in her reevaluation of the role of women in a republic as a means to solving the liberty problem. New approaches to the liberty problem are to be found throughout the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century: considered together, they roughly signify the conclusion of the republican tradition and the emergence of the liberal one. For, in the wake of the American and French revolutions, the expansion and protection of individual liberty specifically – among all the "universality of values" passed on by Renaissance humanists – became more and more important to political thinkers, even as the traditional concern with stabilizing political structures remained. As the old tension between "a universality of values" and stability transformed into this new tension between liberty specifically and stability (i.e., the liberty problem), the ancient virtue solutions revived during that Machiavellian moment of the Renaissance – notably the competing Florentine republics of religious or military virtue – were increasingly viewed with skepticism by moderns, for such solutions emphasized versions of virtue that were actually detrimental to the realization and protection of the value now most deeply held, liberty. A rich variety of alternative approaches – each designed to give greater weight to liberty – were developed instead, from the federalism of James Madison (where liberty would be checked more by law and institutional balances than by civic virtue) to the civil society theory of the Scottish Enlightenment (which emphasized the cultivation of virtue through markets rather than militias or faith). Still other theorists focused on women as an untapped source of civic virtue, and the language Eliot uses to describe Romola's changing role is clearly indebted to this tradition of thought, what intellectual historians now call republican womanhood theory.[11]

Republican womanhood theory contended that women – as the mothers, sisters, and spouses of male citizens – had a special tutorial role in new republics. Some historians, especially literary historians, have mistakenly lumped this theory in with the "separate spheres" ideology that emerges in the early nineteenth century. But there were quite a number of important theorists – including Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller (the associated subjects of an important 1855 essay by Eliot) and John Stuart Mill – who were able to imagine women enjoying equal autonomy and yet also fulfilling special roles.[12]

Familiar as she was with Wollstonecraft, Fuller, and Mill, probably the most important source for Eliot in this regard was an 1834 book by one of Rousseau's French disciples, Louis Aimé-Martin's *De l'éducation des mères de famille, ou la civilization du genre humain par les*

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femmes. This book, which was in the words of historian Jane Rendall "the most dramatic and exaggerated case for 'maternal education'" as well as "extraordinarily influential throughout Europe and the US" (123–24), deeply impressed Eliot as a young woman.[13] In it, Aimé-Martin argues that a stable republic finally depends upon the responsible exercise of civic liberty, and only mothers can successfully teach sons and husbands this lesson (34–35). Building upon a distinction popularized by the liberal philosopher Benjamin Constant in his 1819 "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns," Aimé-Martin argues that the militias of the ancients no longer teach one proper civic conduct. "With us," he notes, "life is more intellectual, society more general; education should therefore be more extended" (63). "[N]ew duties have arisen to modify former duties, and from . . . this has originated a more perfect civilization, in which women are called upon to play the part of legislature, by means of the irresistible influence which they exercise over their husband and their children" (64). Yes, "[a]rmies are required to conquer nations," but "a moral sentiment alone is required to civilize and to save them:" "[h]ere woman's mission reveals itself" (94).

In this light, Eliot's rejection (through Romola) of both the *virtù*- and God-saturated republics of Machiavelli and Savonarola is typical of the modern movement toward a new moderate civic virtue, as counseled by better-known nineteenth-century liberal theorists like Constant and Aimé-Martin, particularly the latter in associating this new kind of virtue with women. The already described return of Eliot's protagonist to Florence to take on a new role as Madonna Romola seems emblematic of this shift. As the narrator explains, if after this return Romola now "came away . . . from some contact with the disciples of Savonarola amongst whom she worshipped, with a sickening sense that these people were miserably narrow, . . . she found herself recovering a firm footing in her works of womanly sympathy. Whatever else made her doubt," the narrator adds, "the help she gave to her fellow-citizens made her sure that Fra Girolamo had been right to call her back" (463; ch. 44).

However, the novel does not end here, and the outlandish plot twists that follow her role as Madonna Romola – the second departure from Florence in a failed suicide attempt by open boat, the nursing of the plague victims, and the final return to Florence as a kind of surrogate mother – are the ones that have most troubled the critics reviewed in the first part of this essay. I read these twists quite differently, though, as in fact representing Eliot's serious effort to tease out the cosmopolitan logic of republican and (in its modern form) liberal theory, something from which nationalist theorists, such as Constant or Aimé-Martin, shied away. Later in her life, Eliot would recollect that these scenes in fact "belonged to my earliest vision of the story" (*Letters* 4: 104), and that original seriousness of purpose combined with the undeniable clumsiness of artistic execution suggest, I think, that these final events served a didactic purpose that Eliot was simply unwilling to give up. For the twists and turns serve to dramatize for the reader Romola's own maturing understanding of how the liberty problem might be solved, an understanding the narrator is at pains to share with the reader in the passage that opens chapter 69, "Homeward." Here, shortly after completing her work in the village struck by plague but before returning yet again to Florence, Romola reflects upon the recent events:

> [Just prior to the suicide attempt] [s]he had felt herself without bonds, without motive; sinking in mere egoistic complaining that life could bring her no content; feeling a right to say, 'I am tired of life, I want to die.' That thought had sobbed within her as she fell asleep, but from the moment after her waking when the cry [of a sick child] had drawn her, she had not even reflected, as she used to

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> do in Florence, that she was glad to live because she could lighten sorrow – she had simply lived, with so energetic an impulse to share the life around her, to answer the call of need and do the work which cried aloud to be done, that the reasons for living, enduring, labouring, never took the form of argument.
>
> The experience was like a new baptism to Romola. In Florence the simpler relations of the human being to his fellow-men had been complicated for her with all the special ties of marriage, the State, and religious discipleship, and when these had disappointed her trust, the shock seemed to have shaken her aloof from life and stunned her sympathy. But now she said, 'It was mere baseness in me to desire death. If everything else is doubtful, this suffering that I can help is certain; if the glory of the cross is an illusion, the sorrow is only the truer. While the strength is in my arm I will stretch it out to the fainting; while the light visits my eyes they shall seek the forsaken.' (650; ch. 69)

As described here, there are three, increasingly obscure, steps in Romola's evolving comprehension of political life. Most clear is the first, her renunciation of her original and uncritical civic dutifulness in Florence, on the grounds that such dutifulness may produce stable political structures (the pillars listed here being Church, State, and marriage) but at the cost of what Pocock labels a "universality of values" and Eliot's narrator "the simpler relations of the human-being to his fellow-men." Second, in a kind of rebirth in the green valley, Romola recovers those simpler relations through an explicitly instinctive service to others, but it seems more important that she – in a third step, at the conclusion of this service – consciously recognizes that sustaining these simpler relations is itself the foundational act, even if political structures are in doubt. "If everything else is doubtful, this suffering that I can help is certain."

Such gestures as these in Eliot's work, it is true, are often read as evidence of her communitarianism, and the next step Romola takes in the novel would seem to support this reading. Shortly after the passage just cited, in the same chapter, Romola reverts rather suddenly to her old local allegiances: "[h]er work in this green valley was done, and the emotions that were disengaged from the people immediately around her rushed back into the old deep channels of use and affection" (650; ch. 69). However, if it is this communitarian impulse that sends her rushing back once and forever to Florence, Romola's political development does not end here. Rather, we find her, in the Epilogue, tending to a "family" of affection rather than biology. We see her tutoring a young boy, Lillo, as Aimè-Martin prescribed, but tutoring him to be loyal finally not to his family or his city but to humanity: "We can only have the highest happiness, such as goes along with being a great man, by having wide thoughts, and much feeling for the rest of the world as well as ourselves" (674; Epilogue). In short, *Romola* seems at last to endorse a kind of virtue that does not sustain the old political structures so much as look beyond them, to a world that protects and cultivates individual liberty without recourse to these hoary old tools of state, the bloody militias of Machiavelli or the fanatic churches of Savonarola.

The sheer ambition of Eliot's utopian liberal cosmopolitanism needs emphasis today, particularly as a corrective to the now dominant readings that find in Eliot's oeuvre the communitarian opposite. For the liberal state in Eliot's later work, beginning with *Romola*, seems itself finally to be little more than a provisional tool, just like those other tools of virtue once proffered by Machiavelli or Savonarola or Wollstonecraft or Mill, for the universal realization of liberty. Eliot's keen sense of the state's only instrumental, as opposed to intrinsic, worth emerges in *Daniel Deronda* (1876) – in what Patrick Brantlinger has called

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that novel's "international nationalism" (272) – but perhaps most clearly in later work "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!," the final essay in *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879).

> [Great n]ations . . . will resist conquest with the very breasts of their women, will pay their millions and their blood to abolish slavery, will share privation in famine and all calamity, will produce poets to sing 'some great story of a man,' and thinkers who theories will bear the test of action. An individual man to be harmoniously great, must belong to a nation of this order, if not in actual existence yet existing in the past, in memory, as a departed, invisible, beloved ideal, once a reality, and perhaps to be restored. A common humanity is not yet enough to feed the rich blood of various activity which makes a complete man. The time is not yet come for cosmopolitanism to be highly virtuous, any more than for communism to suffice for social energy. (147)

Here, in the midst of defending the great nation as the current means to individual greatness, Eliot reveals the very temporariness of the nationalist solution to the liberty problem, a conclusion that *Romola* reaches finally, as well.[14] The time is "not yet come" for cosmopolitanism, or communism, to be highly virtuous, both texts agree, but some day it will.

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NOTES

1. See Nardo for a summary of the feminist criticism (67n), which I return to below.
2. As Harris notes, for F. R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition* (1948) Eliot's research overwhelmed the "felt life" in the novel; nearly forty years later Gillian Beer wrote that it is the "mixture of cumbersome detail and of excoriating insight which makes *Romola* hard to cope with for any willing reader" (qtd. in Harris 349, 347). In 2000, Harris herself argued that the period is "unlikely to be immediately familiar to a present-day reader" and "would have been relatively unfamiliar to many Victorian readers also, even among the caste to whom George Eliot thought of herself as writing" (Harris 348).
3. See Spittles's *George Eliot: Godless Woman* (1993) for a summary and relatively recent endorsement of the positivist reading (72–87). Major modern critics from the 1960s who read *Romola* (or Eliot generally) within the humanist paradigm are Levine, Knoepflmacher, and Miller. It should also be noted that critics who challenge the humanist reading – contending Romola's move from the classicism of her father to the medievalism of Savonarola is a regression rather than a progress – still agree that (as Kenneth Churchill wrote in his 1980 *Italy and English Literature, 1764–1930*) *Romola* is "a story dealing seriously with nineteenth-century English problems incongruously dressed up in unconvincing Italian Renaissance clothes" (141).
4. See Sanders on *Romola*'s "marriage" of humanist paganism and Christian ethics (193) and (the most complete version of this argument) Bonaparte on Eliot's reconciliation (in the character of Romola) of the cultures of "the triptych" (represented by Tito) and "the cross" (by Savonarola) and the subsequent triumph of culture over anarchy (19–20).
5. While my reformulation of Pocock's and Skinner's Machiavellian-Savonarolan spectrum is intended specifically to illuminate a similar range of thinking within Victorian liberalism, I hope also that readers recognize in this spectrum a version of the contemporary debate between "political" liberals like John Rawls (who understand civic virtue to be of instrumental worth) and "comprehensive" liberals like Joseph Raz (who understand civic virtue to be of intrinsic worth). This parallel between Victorian and contemporary liberalism is developed at length in Malachuk, *Perfection, the State, and Victorian Liberalism*.

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6. If Matthew Arnold began his career as a political writer with the "England and the Italian Question" (1859), an important tribute to the significance of Italian "municipalism" to English liberalism, this appreciation did not keep him from judging "the [Italian] people," in a letter home in 1865, as "want[ing] back-bone, serious energy, and power of honest work to a degree that makes one impatient" (431). One finds a similar tension in Margaret Fuller's 1848–51 dispatches from Rome to the *New York Tribune*: see the five included in *The Essential Margaret Fuller*. See Sanders for a review of mid-century English poets inspired by Italian unification, including Browning, Clough, and Swinburne (11). See also Trevelyan's introduction to his 1911 collection, *English Songs of Italian Freedom*: "[t]he [nineteenth-century] men who had been nurtured on ancient and modern poetry, and on an ethical and idealist view of history, saw the most interesting event of their times in the renaissance of Italian freedom" (np).
7. Thompson, who has written the most complete book on George Eliot and Italy, argues that Villari's history was one of the two that most influenced Eliot as she wrote *Romola*, the other being Iacopo Nardi's *Istorie della Città di Firenze* (1582), which provides a detailed account of Florentine history from 1494 to 1538 (71–72). Thompson concludes that Eliot resists the charms of Villari's Savonarola, opting instead to "integrate Savonarola into her own meliorist vision in which Romola's religion of humanity becomes the underlying civilizing force" (75). While not disagreeing that Romola's vision is presented as an alternative to Savonarola's (and Machiavelli's, overlooked by Thompson), I think Thompson follows too closely the humanist paradigm and thus underestimates the degree to which Eliot meant for us to take Savonarola's program seriously as a political and moral program rather than a strictly religious one.
8. "This morning while reading about Savonarola it occurred to me that his life and times afforded fine material for an historical romance. Polly at once caught at the idea with enthusiasm. It is a subject which will fall in with much of her studies and sympathies; and it will give fresh interest to our stay in Florence" (*Letters* 3: 295). See Bonaparte for a summary of the Eliot-Lewes collaboration (22).
9. As Trollope claims, "Of course, I knew that she was digesting the acquisitions of each day with a view to writing, but I had not the slightest idea of the period to which her inquiries were specially directed, or of the nature of the work intended. But when I read 'Romola' I was struck by the wonderful power of absorption manifested in every page of it. The rapidity with which she squeezed out the essence and significance of a most complex period of history and assimilated the net results of its many-sided phases was truly marvelous" (*What I Remember* 462).
10. Much of Eliot's critique of Machiavelli's republican theory is made indirectly through her devastating portrait of the stock "Machiavellian" character, Tito. For example, the same chapter that describes the Florentine citizens bravely taking up arms in defense of the republic – for Machiavelli, the quintessential expression of *virtù* – also exposes Tito cravenly purchasing a coat of armor for his own protection (305–06; ch. 26). That said, Tito's somewhat over-the-top Machiavellian qualities must be considered alongside the character Machiavelli's more thoughtful insights, as already described. Eliot clearly understood Machiavelli as the subtle theorist of republicanism (in *Discourses upon the First Ten Books of Titus Livy* [1531]) as well as the shockingly amoral proponent of realpolitik (in *The Prince*), her rich appreciation of this complex author being something she had in common with much of Machiavelli's nineteenth-century readership if not our own, as Thompson notes (80). Incidentally, early and late in life, Eliot seems personally to have been somewhat sympathetic to Machiavelli's *virtù* theory. In 1840, for example, the 21-year-old Marian Evans wrote that "certainly war . . . has been a necessary vent for impurities and a channel for tempestuous passions. . . . [A]wful as such a sentiment appears, it seems to me that in the present condition of man . . . such a purgation of the body politic is very likely essential to its health" (*Letters* 1: 37). And, in 1875, the 56 year-old George Eliot wrote that "[m]y mind is in this anomalous condition of hating war and loving its discipline, which has been an incalculable contribution to the sentiment of duty" (*Letters* 6: 123).
11. This description of the transition from republicanism to liberalism is to be found throughout the historiography of the republican tradition: an early and still vital contribution here is Pocock's *The*

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Machiavellian Moment. The historiography of republican womanhood theory is equally huge: because of her focus on Britain and France as well as the U.S., Rendall, ch. 2, has been particularly useful here.

12. On Wollstonecraft, see Rendall (55–64) and Johnston (40–58). On Fuller, see for example the promotion of "a senate of matrons" in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (332–35). On Mill's debt to republican womanhood theory, see Malachuk, "John Stuart Mill's Platform Populism" (116–19). For a critique of modern feminist literary critics along the lines suggested here, see Johnston (1–13). Some examples of critics who read *Romola* as endorsing separate spheres would include David, who faults Romola's turn to private acts of sympathy as "remov[ing] intellectual woman from history and . . . relocat[ing] her in a realm of inherency" (188) and Winnett, who argues that although Eliot means for Romola's civic deeds "to demonstrate Romola's intentions to subject her personal energies to the commonweal, what these events show us" – because they are "determined by the logic of . . . Savonarola's plot" – "is the extent to which Romola . . . is subject to the exemplary oedipal plot even when she thinks she is generating a plot of her own" (513). Though neither consider *Romola* specifically, two critics that provide a more sophisticated approach to the relation of public and private spheres in Victorian novels generally are Harman, who reveals the overlooked extent to which female characters do act in public, and Johnston, who persuasively shows that Victorian liberal novelists – including Gaskell and Dickens – had a sophisticated understanding of how private and public spheres sustain one another in the liberal polity.
13. In September 1840, Eliot instructed a friend to "recommend to all your married friends [Sarah Lewis's] *Woman's Mission* [1839] – the most philosophical and masterly on the subject I ever read" (*Letters* 1: 66); a month later, she wrote again to report that Aimé-Martin's book actually "is the real Greece whence *Woman's Mission* has only imported to us a few marbles" (1: 72).
14. I examine Eliot's "nationalist cosmopolitanism" in relation to that of Giuseppe Mazzini, Ernest Renan, and Walt Whitman in Malachuk, "Nationalist Cosmopolitics."

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